

I'm Sorry For Your Loss by **Rozzlynn**

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Summary:

Mia's family taught her to save lives whenever she could, and mourn whenever she could not.

I'm Sorry For Your Loss

Author's Note:

First posted on [tumblr](#) for a '100 Hundred Ways to Say I Love You' meme.

“Oh, what’s that?” Mia knelt to take a closer look at the bundle of dark feathers lying in the grass.

“Be careful, dear,” her father advised.

“Is that a swift?” Alex asked, shaking off the arm round his waist and moving to kneel beside her.

“I think so.” Mia started casting Ply as she scooped it into her hands. The bird barely protested, fluttering one wing while the other pressed against her thumb at a broken angle. She shifted her fingers to support the fragile limb while the holy light of Ply repaired the flesh and bone beneath the feathers. When the light faded, she traced its path with her fingertips, then nodded in satisfaction.

The swift responded with a faint chirp, and scratched her skin with its beak for a few seconds before lying still. She held out her hands, and it made no move to escape.

“The poor thing doesn’t know it’s better,” Mia guessed.

“It must be ill,” her father added. He reached out for the bird, but Alex caught his arm.

“Wait.” Alex gazed at Mia, a strange smile on his face. “Let her try.”

“What?” Mia stared at each of them in turn, wondering what she was missing.

Her father hesitated, then sighed and gave her a reply. “It doesn’t stand much chance of surviving.”

“Let her learn the odds for herself,” Alex replied, still holding her gaze.

Mia moved one hand to shield the bird from view, feeling its heartbeat flutter against her palm. “I - I want to help it, if I can.”

“Of course you do.” Alex kept smiling at her. She wasn’t entirely sure whether she wanted to thank him or slap him.

Picking a third option, she rose to her feet and headed home, taking care not to jostle her new patient.

“Oh, no...” Mia rested her hands on the attic floor, staring at the nest of blankets she’d set up the day before.

“What’s the news?” Alex asked, climbing into the attic after her. “Did our little guest make it through the night?”

She shook her head, unable to tear her gaze away from the blotch of dark feathers folded into the shadows.

“Oh? I’m sorry for your loss.”

He rested a hand on her shoulder. She pulled away and turned to face him. He hadn’t sounded surprised, and he didn’t look it, either.

“You knew this would happen, didn’t you?”

He blinked, surprise flickering across his face for a moment, then sighed and shook his head. "It was worth a try."

"Oh..." She deflated, leaning against his chest when he wrapped an arm round her shoulders.

"Remember, when a patient is ill, Ply can only bolster their strength while they fight off the infection. It's not as simple as healing an injury."

"I know. It's just... Whenever we've helped Father, and he's lost patients, I still knew he'd done all he could, because it was him. But I thought I could do this by myself. If I'd sat with it though the night - "

"Then you'd be exhausted, and little use to anyone else." He ruffled her hair, speaking gently enough to keep his reply from sounding like a reprimand. "Keep practicing at your own pace. You'll learn your limits, in due course."

She nodded, closing her eyes for a moment.

He patted her shoulder, then rose to his feet. "Come on, now. Ilya is cooking pancakes."

"He didn't think I could do it." She pulled a blanket over the swift, concealing it for now.

"He didn't want you to waste your energy and upset yourself."

"I'm not hungry."

"You will be, when you see the menu. We've opened a fresh jar of blackberry jam."

She scrunched the edge of the blanket between her fingers. Her voice came out quieter than intended. "Birds eat blackberries."

He sighed, and she knew before he spoke that he thought she was being tiresome.

"I'll give you a minute, shall I?"

She bowed her head, and heard him leave. Clasping her hands, she turned her thoughts to her ongoing duty.

Have mercy, oh Mercury, on the turbulent sea of life. Grant your blessing to those who drift into your fathomless waters, forever returned to your embrace.

"No words can express the depth of our gratitude. For sa..., uh, and for preserving us, mind and body, against the... against time. Beloved of us all..."

The blacksmith's voice rolled through the sanctum, resonant and rich despite his difficulties interpreting the stack of papers set on the altar.

Mia sat center front, upright and still, trying not to choke on the air. She heard Alex drawing short breaths, and she'd have known he was seething even if he didn't keep hissing Roan's stumbling points under his breath. *Sanctifying. Vicissitudes.*

The Mercury Clan were responsible for conducting funerals, but the townspeople had taken this one out of her hands, acknowledging that she and Alex were both too close to the deceased.

They'd asked Mia whether she'd like to speak for a few minutes, and she'd frozen up, unable to imagine standing in front of everyone and announcing that her best wasn't good enough. That she'd lost half her world.

Alex had offered to help write the service, and then insisted. Mia glanced to her left, gazing through her eyelashes at his white-knuckled grip on the bench. Perhaps he was regretting that he hadn't pushed for more.

She focused on pacing her breaths to keep the ache in her chest from worsening, and eventually became aware of a spreading silence. No more words of praise echoed from the walls. She swung round to face the sound of shuffling on her right, and saw Dunya rise to her feet.

"Be sure to call on me if you need anything, darling." Dunya reached out to stroke her shoulder, offering her the faintest of smiles. "We're all so sorry for your loss."

Mia nodded, and watched as Dunya turned to leave.

Discomforted by the silence on her left, she stole another glance at Alex, and her heart pitched when she saw him glaring at their neighbour's back, his jaw tense and his leg shifting. She grabbed his hand, and he didn't relinquish his chokehold on the bench. He turned on her with an empty stare, and she met it without blinking. Her pulse struggled on, warning her that this was more than a mere moment stretched to unfeasible lengths by her perception.

When she came over dizzy, she lowered her gaze and let out a breath that she'd been holding for too long. His hand lay unresponsive beneath hers, and she squeezed harder.

Her fingers were starting to turn numb when he sighed and squeezed back.

She shifted closer, leaning her shoulder against his arm, but didn't quite dare to look up.

Mia cast a look at the lengthening shadows in the surrounding woods, then shook her head and turned to Dunya. "We'd better head home before it gets dark. If he's gone any further than this, I doubt we'll find him until he wants to be found."

"Roan and the others should be back from Bilibin tomorrow. They'll be able to tell us if he headed south." Dunya hesitated, and glanced over her shoulder. "We could grab some lanterns and try the coast along the cliffs, to see if anything's washed up."

"No. He wouldn't..." Mia's fists clenched, and she folded her arms to hide them.

"I'm sorry, but we can't know for certain."

"Check the coast if you like, but I know he wouldn't go that way. He wouldn't abandon me."

"Let's hope not." Dunya looked her over, then sighed and nodded. "You're right. We should call it a night."

"Thank you for helping with the search." Mia tried to offer her a smile, but it proved too difficult, so she bowed her head and started to pick a path through the undergrowth.

"It's the least I could do. Please don't hesitate to ask if you need help with anything else."

"Could you stop by Karl and Eva's place, in that case? They fell sick during the night, and I changed their sheets earlier, but I haven't had time to do the laundry."

“Sure, I’ll bundle it in with mine.”

“Thank you. I’d better finish my rounds when I get back. And - and his.” Mia glanced back and saw Dunya watching her with an odd frown, so she faced forward again and tried to keep up the conversation. “I’ll check on Liza first. I had to dilute the broth four times this morning before she managed to keep any of it down. Hopefully a few hours of rest will have done her some good.”

“You’ve got far too much on your plate, haven’t you? I can’t believe he’s left you to take on all the work alone, when you’re so recently bereaved.”

“So is he,” Mia replied softly. When this didn’t get a response, she drew a deep breath and forged on. “Anyway, it probably won’t be for long. I’m sure he’ll return from some kind of errand sooner or later. He’d better apologize for neglecting to leave a note.”

“You have to make plans in case he doesn’t. You’re working hard, no-one can fault you on that, but we need someone to watch the sanctum too.”

Mia stopped to contemplate the forest floor. “I’ll order more supplies, and train someone in their use. That’s how most places get by.”

Dunya drew up beside her, fallen leaves crunching and flaking in her wake. “I’ll spread the word that you’re looking for an assistant.”

“Thank you.”

“You don’t need to keep thanking me,” Dunya replied. She laughed under her breath, as if at a child’s antics.

Mia held still, forcing herself not to wince. "I must keep in mind that I still have reasons to be thankful."

"Oh, darling, of course you do. Don't pay me any mind. Say, why don't you stop by my place for tea once you've finished your rounds? You do so much for all of us, you could stand to let us take care of you too."

"I - I will." Mia looked up to meet her gaze, giving her a nod in lieu of a smile.

"Feel free to stay the night, too."

"That might help, actually. I haven't been getting much sleep lately. He hasn't either, and it's hard not to stay up worrying, even when he says he doesn't need anything and tells me to rest. Now the house is even emptier - " Mia bit her lip, cutting herself short. "I'm sorry, you don't need to hear me complain. I should be - "

"It's okay. Honestly, I wish you'd confide in me more often. Everyone in town would rather do more for you, if you'd accept the help. We've been concerned ever since your mother passed away, gods bless her gentle soul. Since then... well, it wasn't fair on you, the way those two decided to hook up."

Mia blinked, needing a moment to process the fact that Dunya could say that with a straight face. "We were a family..."

"Now, darling, don't take this the wrong way. You seemed happy enough, and we depended on them too thoroughly to complain, though it would've been a different matter if you'd been distressed. But if it had been anyone else - "

"I'd appreciate it if you didn't speak a word against them." Mia met her gaze, summoning a thin smile despite the ice taking hold in the pit of her stomach.

"I... of course not. I'm only saying that we want what's best for you, and for Imil. If your father had remarried, he could've given you siblings to share your responsibilities and help preserve the Clan. None of us expected to lose him so suddenly, but he knew he wouldn't last forever. He shouldn't have left you to shoulder your burdens alone."

"Believe it or not, you can't decide someone's life by committee."

"Well, no, more's the pity. It was a crying shame to see Alex waste his potential too. If he'd settled down with a girl his own age instead, he could've been a father by now."

"Perhaps he will be, someday." Mia kept her smile fixed in place, though her skin felt as if it might crack.

"Let's hope so. The world needs more of your kind." Dunya gave her an appraising look. "You're getting to that age yourself. Have you given your future much thought?"

"At a time like this? I only wish - " Mia choked up, and let her gaze flee to the forest floor once again.

"You'd do well to keep your options open until you've figured out what you want. A girl like you could make all the guys beg."

"I don't want them to beg. I want them to be well."

Dunya laughed again, though her tone remained fond. "Things change. You'll see what I mean."

Mia shook her head, fruitlessly searching for a polite way to end the conversation.

“You might see more of the boys making a move to comfort you, now that Alex isn’t here to disapprove.”

“He never...”

“What is he, again? Your fourth or fifth cousin?”

“Fourth cousin, once removed.”

“The two of you could’ve been a good match, if he didn’t mind waiting.”

“No. That’s just... No.”

Mia turned on her heel and set off towards town at a brisk pace. She suppressed the urge to treat Dunya to a nice, cold Douse, on account of the adverse effect it might have on her health.

“I was only teasing, sweetie,” Dunya called after her, shuffling through the leaves in no great hurry.

Mia paused by a patch of wild blackberries, and plastered on another smile before turning to wait. She’d have to work until late this evening, and she couldn’t afford to pass up the offer of a hot meal and an easier night’s sleep. After all, she couldn’t do this alone.

She picked a blackberry, and as the sharp taste hit her tongue, her eyes started brimming with tears. She couldn’t figure out why until an old memory surfaced. A warm pair of arms wrapped around her, and she buried her face in her neighbour’s dress, adrift in remembrance of a time when her sorrows had been outweighed by blessings.